

# UNITED STATES POLICY TOWARD ESTONIA AND THE BALTIC STATES 1918–1920 AND 1989–1991

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## ABSTRACT

The following paper deals with US policy toward the Baltic states at two different time periods (1918–20 and 1989–91) and by two very different presidents (Woodrow F. Wilson and George H. W. Bush). The first period represented the time that saw the emergence of the United States on the world stage. Woodrow Wilson seemingly advocated self-determination as was understood by a number of his advisers at the Peace Conference, but eventually decided to support the unity of Russia as part of an anti-Bolshevik policy. During the second period, George H. W. Bush negotiated a settlement to end another conflict, the Cold War. While self-determination of the Baltic states (on the basis of the US non-recognition policy) was not of prime importance for the US, it nevertheless was brought up at every summit meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev and came to be linked to the resolution of economic issues between the two major powers. Ultimately the restoration of independence was decided by developments in the Soviet Union, but US policy made the Baltic question an international issue and helped resolve it peacefully.

*Keywords:* Woodrow F. Wilson, George H. W. Bush, national self-determination, end of the Cold War

1918–20 and 1989–91, one set of years marks the beginning years of the twentieth century, the other, in effect the closing years of the short century (1914–91) that began with World War I and concluded with the end of the Cold War. The century came to be an American century as the United States emerged on the world stage in the aftermath of World War I as the world's largest economy that had financed the Entente war effort. The United States was one of the four major victorious powers at the end of the First World War that then participated in the post-war Paris Peace Conference. In 1991 the United States stood alone as the world's sole super power. How did the United States shape international relations in the world as a result of its rise to world power status? How did the United States envisage the world

at its moment of triumph in the Cold War? Where were the Baltic States and Estonia in this world?

The aim of the paper is to provide a comparative framework for helping us analyze US policy toward Estonia and the Baltic States during these two very different periods. What are the similarities and differences or continuities and discontinuities in US policy? We will then review the events themselves in this comparative perspective.

We will start the comparative analysis with a review of the key personalities. To begin with the presidents: the newly elected president in 1989 was George H. W. Bush who, at the time of his assumption to office, was unusually well-versed on issues of foreign policy for an incoming president. Born in the Northeast of the United States, he was the son of a Republican US Senator from Connecticut. He had served as a naval pilot in World War II in the Pacific. Upon graduation from Yale University Bush moved to Texas where he pursued at first a career in the oil business. In 1966 he was elected a Republican Congressman from a district in Texas. Subsequently he served as the US ambassador to the United Nations, Chairman of the Republican National Committee, US envoy to China, Director of the CIA, and then as Vice-President during Ronald Reagan's two terms as president (1981–89).

By contrast, Woodrow Wilson was a southern Democrat, born in Virginia, the son of a Presbyterian minister. He grew up in the South and graduated from Princeton. After a short stint as a lawyer, Wilson entered the world of academe and taught at a number of colleges and universities. In 1902 he was elected President of Princeton University. He next served a two-year term as the Democratic Party governor of New Jersey (1910–12) and then was elected President of the United States in 1912 receiving only 42% of the vote in a three-person race. His experience in international affairs was minimal. In fact, his major accomplishments during his first term came in the field of domestic reform – the establishment of the Federal Reserve System (US Central Bank) and shaping anti-monopoly business law (Clayton Anti-trust Act). When World War I broke out in 1914 he tried hard to maintain US neutrality. Wilson was re-elected president narrowly in 1916 on the slogan: "He kept us out of war." Yet on 2 April 1917 Wilson called for a declaration of war against Germany on the issue of "freedom of the seas" that was being violated by a German declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare in the Atlantic Ocean. Following Congressional approval, the Declaration of War on Germany was issued on 6 April 1917.

The team of foreign policy advisers chosen by George Bush proved able to work cohesively as a team. They were backed up by a sizable staff

of experts on Soviet, European, and Asian affairs. Bush's Secretary of State was his personal friend James Baker from Texas. Baker had served as Ronald Reagan's Chief of Staff in 1981–85 and then as Secretary of Treasury in 1985–88. The National Security Adviser for Bush was Gen. Brent Scowcroft, who had previously served in that position under President Ford.

Woodrow Wilson lacked the staff available to George Bush. His Secretary of State from 1915–19 was Robert Lansing, an expert in international law. Lansing's positions on major foreign policy initiatives of Woodrow Wilson, like the League of Nations, often departed from Wilson's views. Wilson kept him because of his expertise in international law, despite the fact that Wilson at times disparaged Lansing's legalistic approach to international relations. The State Department under Lansing was much smaller in size and lacking in depth and expertise when compared to the Department of James Baker. There was no National Security Council in existence during Wilson's time. In a sense Wilson's personal adviser, Col. Edward House from Texas, served as a prototype National Security Adviser, advising Wilson on foreign affairs and representing Wilson in negotiations with foreign governments. In 1917–18 House gathered around him a body of experts, the Inquiry, drawn from the academic world of universities to prepare the United States for the peace treaty negotiations following the war. Many members of the Inquiry team travelled to Paris for the Versailles Conference where they served as American members on various committees set up by the Versailles negotiators. Gradually in the course of 1919 Col. House lost favor with Wilson, and by the time of the signing of the Versailles Peace Treaty he was no longer being consulted by Wilson. Needless to say, there was no CIA to provide intelligence information nor assessments. However, another important official, the American Food Administrator Herbert Hoover, while serving under Wilson, was in a position to quite independently set up his own network of agents to supervise food aid and engage in other economic activity involving finance, shipping, land transportation, etc. all over Europe, including the Baltic States, Finland, and Poland.<sup>1</sup>

What was the Baltic question for these two very different US administrations? For the Bush administration the issue involved existing US policy. The Baltic states had existed as independent states in the period between the two world wars. The United States had not recognized the Soviet annexation of 1940. All of the US officials who dealt with foreign affairs were aware of this fact. Besides this, support in Congress existed

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<sup>1</sup> Hoover generally used the term "Baltic states".

for this policy. In conversations with Soviet officials the Baltic issue was usually framed in terms of non-recognition, a matter of legal principle. At a deeper level the Baltic States were included in the area where “self-determination” was to be applied.<sup>2</sup>

How was the Baltic question framed by Wilson and his administration? The issue was new, unlike the claims of Poland and of the nationalities of the Austro-Hungarian empire.<sup>3</sup> The Baltic question arose in international affairs during the Brest-Litovsk peace negotiations where the argument over the future of the Baltic territory was carried out in the language of national self-determination. Wilson did not use the phrase “self-determination” in his Fourteen Points speech. Yes, he had talked about “government by consent of the governed” in his previous speeches, but this is not quite the same thing as “self-determination”. It was in a speech that he gave on 11 February 1918 that he for the first time used the phrase “self-determination”. It is a phrase that he apparently adopted from the language used in the Brest-Litovsk negotiations. From this point onwards, the interpretation of nationalists around the world was that Wilson was talking about the application of universal national self-determination.<sup>4</sup> This indeed became the essence of how Wilsonianism came to be defined. There was a Baltic connection in this speech.

The Baltic issue for US officials in 1919, thus became an issue framed by the concept of “self-determination.” Self-determination was used in Central Europe by the United States in recognizing the new states that emerged as a result of the collapse of empires. However, numerous US officials, including Robert Lansing, the Secretary of State, were uneasy with the term and rejected its universal application as well as its application to the Baltic states.

What was the importance of the Baltic question among other problems during the two periods? For the Bush period, we may divide foreign

<sup>2</sup> George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A world transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 206. Bush and Scowcroft noted: “Of the internal turbulence, the states which most concerned us, and which would most affect the US-Soviet relationship in the coming months, were the Baltics. Their national aspirations symbolized the self-determination we supported throughout Eastern Europe and Germany. The Baltics were an emotional issue for us. They were different from any other Soviet republic or Eastern European state. Notwithstanding their incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1940 (which we had never recognized), we had allowed them to maintain diplomatic legations in Washington representing the old states.”

<sup>3</sup> Victor S. Mamatey, *The United States and East Central Europe, 1914–1918: a study in Wilsonian diplomacy and propaganda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

<sup>4</sup> Erez Manela, *Wilsonian moment: self-determination and the international origins of anticolonial nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

policy topics (here we will limit ourselves to US–Soviet relations) into two major categories. Of prime importance were: nuclear and conventional arms reductions, East European anti-Communist revolutions, German unification, and some of the regional issues like Afghanistan and Central America. In late summer of 1990 the Gulf crisis, occasioned by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, took its place among these issues. Items of secondary rank included human rights, economic relations, some of remaining regional problem areas, and the Baltic issue.

Of prime importance for Woodrow Wilson were, of course, the establishment of a League of Nations and the conclusion of the Peace Treaty with Germany that was being negotiated at Versailles. For Wilson, the League of Nations was to provide a guarantee for a future peaceful world. With regard to the Peace Treaty, it was important for Wilson that the treaty follow his Fourteen Points peace proposal. Second-rank items for Wilson would have included economic questions – such as providing for European economic recovery through food relief, shipping, finances, and other activities of the Supreme Economic Council where Herbert Hoover and other American economic experts worked. Also of secondary importance was the problem of Russia – Bolshevism, the Civil War, Allied intervention, etc. The Baltic issue was subsumed under the latter two sets of issues.

Let us now turn to a more detailed look at the two time periods. For most of World War I the United States was the world's foremost neutral state. True to past traditions the Wilson administration held fast to the doctrine of "freedom of the seas" which meant that the United States as a neutral state had the right even in wartime to trade with anyone it wanted including the belligerents. President Wilson, elected in 1912, protested vigorously against the British blockade in the North Sea and also German countermeasures that involved submarine warfare against shipping to Britain. Since British shipping dominated the Atlantic trade and German shipping came to a halt in the war because of the dominance of the British navy, the United States became the major supplier of food, war materials and other commodities to the Entente powers: Britain, France, and Italy. Woodrow Wilson periodically offered his services as a peacemaker in the war. However, the German decision to engage in unrestricted submarine warfare and the sinking of several US ships led Wilson, first to break off relations with Germany, and then to declare war on Germany on 6 April 1917. United States activity initially consisted of sending the US fleet to participate in the British North Sea blockade and voting a line of credit of

\$10 billion to finance Entente purchases of food, supplies and armaments from the United States.

As the United States increased its activity in the war effort in 1917, Russia began to retreat from its participation in the war and, following the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks, the new Soviet authorities began to negotiate Russia's withdrawal from the war. In the midst of the Brest-Litovsk peace negotiations, on 8 January 1918, Woodrow Wilson issued his Fourteen Points speech which outlined a rationale for continuing the war and set forth a set of conditions for a peace. Among the points, Point 13 called for a restoration of a Polish state, Point 6 for a restoration of the full territorial integrity of the rest of Russia. A month later in a speech on 11 February (the Four Principles speech) Wilson criticized the German position at Brest-Litovsk on the question of the Baltic provinces. It is the first time Wilson actually used the phrase "self-determination" and used it in the context of American goals in the war:<sup>5</sup>

He (Chancellor Hertling) will discuss with no one but the representative of Russia what disposition shall be made of the peoples and the lands of the Baltic provinces. [...]

National aspirations must be respected; peoples may now be dominated and governed only by their consent. 'Self-determination' is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative of action which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril.

Of importance to Estonia and the Baltic States is Wilson's opposition to the Brest-Litovsk peace settlement. Germany would have had to have won the war to have held onto its gains in the east.

If we review Wilson and American policy toward Estonia and the Baltic states, we may identify a number of features. First Wilson was opposed to German control over the Baltic provinces. This we saw in Wilson's Fourteen Point speech and in the Four Principles speech. However, at the end of the war Col. House requested that a longer document explaining the Fourteen Points (which was to be the basis of the Peace Treaty) be written. The resulting Cobb-Lippmann memorandum of the Fourteen Points changed in particular Point Six (the policy toward Russia) by questioning the territorial integrity of Russia and advocated instead self-determination for Finns, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians and Ukrainians.<sup>6</sup> This was the

<sup>5</sup> Woodrow Wilson, 11 February 1918, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. by Arthur Link (Princeton: Princeton University Press), v. 46, 291–297 (hereafter PWW).

<sup>6</sup> PWW, v. 51, 498–499.

document that Col. House, as Wilson's representative, presented to British Prime Minister Lloyd-George, French Prime Minister Clemenceau, and the Italian Prime Minister Orlando at the armistice negotiations in Paris in late October and early November 1918. This memorandum was not written by Wilson, but was approved by him, and further spread the view that Wilson advocated a radical self-determination for the peoples of the world. This interpretation proved to be mistaken. The memorandum, however, did have an impact on US economic policy toward the Baltic States, as it encouraged US officials like Herbert Hoover in their efforts to bring Estonia and the Baltic States into the network of food assistance and economic reconstruction of Europe after the war.

As has been noted, Wilson's priorities proved to be primarily dedicated to establishing a new international order via a League of Nations and then in negotiating a peace treaty with Germany based on the ideas put forward in the Fourteen Points speech. He came to support the reestablishment of a Polish state and the break-up of the defeated countries of Ottoman Empire and eventually also Austria-Hungary. In the spring of 1919 he also support the independence of Finland. But there he stopped. While at the end of the war he expressed uncertainty as to whether Russia would maintain its cohesion, apparently by late spring and summer of 1919 he came to feel that a commitment to the unity of the Russian empire was the best way to oppose Bolshevism. Secretary of State Robert Lansing and indeed the State Department were committed throughout the period and even afterward to Russian unity and opposed any recognition of Soviet Russia throughout 1919–20. The activity of Boris Bakhmeteff, the Russian ambassador to the United States appointed by the Russian Provisional Government in 1917 and recognized by the United States until 1922, was important in shaping this view. Non-Bolshevik Russian politicians in exile, as well as hold-over Russian diplomatic representatives in various countries, could not accept the independence of the Baltic States. The viewpoint of the Wilson administration came to be codified in the Colby note (9 August 1920) that provided for the non-recognition of the Soviet Russian government as well as the non-recognition of the Baltic States.<sup>7</sup> It was only the next administration from the opposite Republican political party that provided for the United States recognition in 1922, well after most other countries of the world. It would have been much more difficult for a Democratic party administration to have revised a major part of the Colby note that was based on the idea of the territorial integrity of the Russian empire except

<sup>7</sup> PWW, v. 66, 19–25.

for a small Poland and Finland. In 1991 the gap in recognition was a matter of days (Iceland: 22 August; United States: 2 September), while in the earlier period it was more than a year.<sup>8</sup>

Now to turn to US policy of the 1989–91 period. While the original impulse for considering ways to end the Cold War came from Mikhail Gorbachev and was part of his perestroika program to revitalize the Soviet economic system by cutting military spending, in order to succeed Gorbachev needed a partner in the United States. The partners became Ronald Reagan during his second term in office and his Secretary of State, George Schultz. The primary issue was nuclear weapons. Following unsuccessful talks on eliminating all of the nuclear weapons at the Reykjavik summit of 1987, the two gradually negotiated more limited and achievable agreements – the most important agreement provided for the abolition of Intermediate Range missiles with nuclear warheads. Negotiations also began on START, the reduction of inter-continental missiles with nuclear warheads and were to be continued by the Bush administration. Besides arms control, the other major item on which Reagan-era negotiations had been conducted were so-called regional issues – Soviet activity in Third World countries. Here Afghanistan headed the list, but Central America was also important. Among what I have defined as second ranking issues, human rights was a constant theme – particular cases were brought up by Reagan. The Baltic issue did not surface as a topic during the Reagan period. It is instructive that US/Soviet negotiations began during the presidency of someone who was regarded as a conservative Republican president. A momentum, however, built up that continued into the next administration.<sup>9</sup>

In November of 1988 George H. W. Bush was elected the 41st president of the United States. Even though he belonged to the same political party as Ronald Reagan and had been Reagan's Vice President, there was very little carryover of high-ranking personnel into the Bush administration. The one major holdover was James Baker, who had been Ronald Reagan's Chief of Staff and Secretary of Treasury and then became the Secretary of State for Bush. Gen. Brent Scowcroft, who had served in that office during the Presidency of Gerald Ford, was named National Security Adviser. Bush was better prepared on assuming office on foreign policy than any of the other twentieth-century US presidents. The three, with their advisers

<sup>8</sup> The United States recognized the Baltic States on 27 July 1922; Britain and France had recognized the Baltic States on 26 January 1921. There is a gap of a year and a half. See: Malbone W. Graham, Jr., *New governments of Eastern Europe* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1927) 287–290 and 313–314.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Service, *The end of the Cold War* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015).



in the State Department and the National Security Council were to form a remarkably cohesive team with very little of the infighting of previous administrations. It was a team that shared a similar world view based on a common understanding of the origins and course of the Cold War that had been the central feature for US foreign policy since the Truman administration of the late 1940's. The basic assumptions that were accepted by all of the senior officials of the Bush administration and their advisers were that it was the Soviet imposition of Communist regimes on the countries of Eastern Europe and the division of Germany that had led to the Cold War. They fully identified with US policy toward Western Europe in the late 1940's – that is with the US economic, political, and security commitment to Western Europe exemplified by the Marshall Plan and NATO. For them, Woodrow Wilson's policy toward Europe following World War I, that was based on a withdrawal from European affairs, had been a mistake. Following the signing of the Versailles Peace Treaty with Germany, the United States withdrew its military forces from Europe and ended war-time economic cooperation with the Entente powers. Woodrow Wilson wished the United States to devote its energy to the League of Nations.

Following a six-month policy review of US negotiations with the Soviet Union, the Bush administration, while maintaining the agenda items of the Reagan-Schultz years (nuclear disarmament, regional conflicts, and human rights) shifted its focus. Total nuclear disarmament which Ronald Reagan set as a goal was dropped in favor of a partial reduction, leaving nuclear deterrence in place. Throughout the Cold War the United States had been faced with the fact of Soviet superiority in conventional forces on the European continent that could only be balanced by nuclear weapons. For the Bush administration, Reagan's concept of a "Star Wars" missile shield gradually faded as a subject of discussion. Greater attention in disarmament negotiations came to be paid to conventional force reductions in Europe. Regional issues remained on the agenda as a key issue – for the Bush administration the focus was on Central America.

It was clearly understood inside the Bush administration that US policy was to be guided by what was regarded as US national interests as well as American values and principles. Hence, for example, with regard to policy toward China, President Bush, while expressing outrage over the Tiananmen Square crackdown of 1989 that led to the deaths of hundreds of Chinese student demonstrators, sent signals to the Chinese leadership of his desire to prevent any long-term rupture in relations. US interests

demanded continuous interaction between China and the United States. Human rights, while of concern, was not the primary issue.<sup>10</sup>

In Europe events on the ground lead the Bush administration to shift its primary focus to Eastern Europe in 1989 and then in 1990 to Germany. As developments in Poland began to unfold in June 1989 the view the Bush administration adopted was that working for change in Eastern Europe was a priority issue – since the Cold War began over the fate of Eastern Europe, providing self-determination to the countries of the area would eliminate the cause of the Cold War.<sup>11</sup> As US-Soviet negotiations resumed after the pause of the first half of 1989, the attention of the Bush administration was directed toward remaking Eastern Europe more than the Soviet Union. Then to everyone's surprise, Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe in the fall of 1989, as one after the other the Communist party regimes gave way to non-Communist governments. Did the US and the Bush administration bring this about? The US contribution was actually limited to a certain amount of morale-boosting to the peaceful nature of the changes and creating the atmospheric conditions that enabled Gorbachev and the Soviets to accept the transformation, by signaling that the US was not going to take major advantage of the developments. Modest, carefully thought-out steps were regarded as preferable to radical posturing. Yes, Bush and Baker realized that they were witnessing momentous changes in the balance of power in Europe. They carefully tried to nudge the changes in a direction that reflected US interests. Still, the bigger input into the transformations was the Soviet input – the example of perestroika launched by Gorbachev in the Soviet Union and then Gorbachev's decision not to intervene militarily and accept the extent of the changes which surprised him as much as they did everyone else. Bush, in his visits to Poland and Hungary in the summer of 1989, was careful and modest in pushing any American agenda.<sup>12</sup> As most commentators have noted, Bush preferred evolution to revolution in the area. He did not need to make grand announcements nor triumphal speeches. Events were going his way, and all he needed to do was give periodic statements of moral support. Brent Scowcroft, his National Security Adviser, reinforced by his counsels the voice of caution and

<sup>10</sup> George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A world transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 86–111.

<sup>11</sup> Robert L. Hutchings, *American diplomacy and the end of the Cold War: an insider's account of U.S. policy in Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 35–41. Robert L. Hutchings was the director for European affairs at the National Security Council in 1989–92.

<sup>12</sup> Bush, Scowcroft, *A world transformed*, 113–131.

moderation in politics. Events in Eastern Europe made it even more necessary for Bush to support Gorbachev, who was raising no obstacles to the East European revolutions. For Bush, Gorbachev's policy of non-intervention in Eastern Europe was concrete evidence that Gorbachev was real and that real, irreversible changes were taking place in what had been the Communist world. The Cold War, indeed was coming to an end.

As the post-World War II political balance in Europe was breaking apart, events in Eastern Europe and the impact of Gorbachev's policies undermined the East German Communist regime in November of 1989. The downfall of Honecker and the opening of the wall raised for the United States strategically even larger questions about Europe than changes that had taken place in Eastern Europe. Questions arose on German unification, the status of Soviet armed forces in Germany, and the future of the alliance systems in Europe. From the beginning, Bush and US policy, in distinction to British, French, and Soviet policies, supported German unification. The United States had little to fear from a united Germany. Bush, as a result, worked with Helmut Kohl, the West German Chancellor, to bring about the unification of Germany on western terms.<sup>13</sup>

German unification came to be framed in terms of "self-determination".<sup>14</sup> The 2 + 4 formula in the American interpretation meant that the Germans would work out their destiny and the terms for unification themselves and not have a solution imposed from the outside by the former four occupying powers. When the West German political parties won the East German elections, the logical result was that East Germany came to be absorbed into a unified Germany under the West German constitution – the Basic Law of 1949. For Bush the most important element in the German unification process was to anchor the united Germany into the NATO alliance. His major victory was to gain Gorbachev's acceptance of this. The actual details of the unification process and the Soviet military withdrawal were to be worked out by the Germans themselves.

While we can say that Eastern Europe and Germany dominated the US agenda during the first two years of the Bush presidency, other issues continued to be discussed with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze. Arms reduction continued as one of the issues, but, as we have noted, it did not predominate in the same way as it had during the Reagan administration. Nuclear

<sup>13</sup> Brent Scowcroft noted: "In fact President Bush, was the first in the Administration to back reunification unequivocally, as well as the first Western leader – a point Kohl never forgot." Bush, Scowcroft, *A world transformed*, 188.

<sup>14</sup> Hutchings, *American diplomacy and the end of the Cold War*, 100, 137–142.

arms reduction was a complex problem where each detail had to be considered and negotiated in a tedious process. Most “regional issues” (for example, those in Africa) gradually faded into issues of secondary importance. Human rights issues such as emigration and economic issues that centered on repeal of the Jackson-Vanik amendment which placed restrictions on Soviet trade with the United States continued to be part of over-all discussions. Gorbachev clearly looked to trade and investment from the West to help him revitalize the Soviet economy. But, as long as he was unwilling to undertake major economic reform in the Soviet Union, the Bush administration was unwilling to make major financial commitments to him. The fear among US policy makers by 1990 was no longer over whether Gorbachev was a genuine reformer, but a worry on how long he was likely to survive in the leadership position in the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup> It was clearly in the interest of American policy makers that Gorbachev survive.

This is the context for the Baltic issue in US policy. The issue arose, of course, as a result of the Baltic Revolutions of 1988–89 in the Baltic republics. It was the Bush administration that placed the Baltic issue on the agenda of international politics at the highest level. This has to have been a decision of George Bush himself. Indeed we have a testimonial to that from James Baker. One can have serious doubts whether a Michael Dukakis-led Democratic Party administration (George Bush’s opponent in 1988) would have made the Baltic issue a part of a negotiation process between the United States and the Soviet Union. The earliest mention of an explanation of US Baltic policy to the Soviets that I have been able to find is by James Baker in his discussions with his Soviet counterpart, Edward Shevardnadze, in their November 1989 meeting at James Baker’s vacation ranch in Wyoming. Here, among other topics Baker brought up the issue of the American non-recognition policy of the Soviet annexation of the Baltic States:<sup>16</sup>

But let me also tell you that it has been US policy for over forty years not to recognize the incorporation of the Baltic republics into the Soviet Union. These Baltic states were independent. There remains a very strong public sentiment in our country that identifies with these Baltic states. I wanted him to understand that our Baltics policy was rooted in historical and domestic political realities, and that the President

<sup>15</sup> Robert M. Gates, *From the shadows* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997). Gates notes that already in May 1989 the CIA predictions were pessimistic on Gorbachev’s political survival (511). Gates was the Deputy National Security Adviser during this time.

<sup>16</sup> James Baker, *The politics of diplomacy: revolution, war & peace, 1989–1992* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995), 146–147.

could not shift away from this position even if he wanted to (which he didn't in any case).

Shevardnadze countered Baker with the standard Soviet arguments, but at the same time noted that force had not been used in order to stifle the popular front movements in the Baltic republics that were calling for independence. The response does suggest that Soviet reluctance to use force in the Baltics did not necessarily rest on the opinion of the outside world.

At the Malta Summit meeting between Bush and Gorbachev at the beginning of December 1989, Bush brought up the Baltic states issue at the last session of the conference on 3 December.<sup>17</sup> Topics discussed at preceding sessions included humanitarian concerns, economics and trade, Central America, German unification, and Eastern Europe. According to Bush an understanding was reached at Malta that no force was to be used in the Baltics. This was an important development for the Baltic cause. It meant that US Baltic policy was to hold the Soviets to a certain standard of behavior in the Baltics from now onward. It again may be noted that Bush in negotiations with Gorbachev defined the Baltic question in legal terminology of non-recognition, not self-determination, and goes back to the fact that the Baltic States had existed in the inter-war period and had been recognized as states by the United States. Of course, one way the issue could have been resolved was through self-determination – that is the populations of the area determine their own fate, similar to what was happening in Germany. However, US policy was to separate the Baltic republics from the other republics of the Soviet Union. In fact US preference was that the rest of the Soviet Union remain intact. This is why in most of the US–Soviet discussions the Baltic issue was not defined in terms of self-determination, even though one could argue that the basis of the policy rested on self-determination. It is true that at times James Baker offered the advice to Shevardnadze that the Soviets could allow self-determination for the other republics as well.<sup>18</sup> Whenever the Baltic issue was raised the standard response of Gorbachev and Shevardnadze was to consider the Baltic republics in the same light as the other Soviet republics and reject Baltic exceptionalism. Still, after Malta, Bush and his advisers thought that

<sup>17</sup> “At the following one-on-one, I went straight for the Baltics and asked Gorbachev about the possible use of force [...]. ‘But if you use force (in the Baltics) – you don’t want to – that would create a firestorm,’ I interjected. I pointed out that the United States would have to respond to any use of force by the Soviets there.” Bush, Scowcroft, *A world transformed*, 172. See also: Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, *At the highest levels: the inside story of the end of the Cold War* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1993), 163–165.

<sup>18</sup> Baker, *The politics of diplomacy*, 203.

a basic understanding had been reached on the Baltics to avoid force and let peaceful developments run their course.

By the spring of 1990 the Baltic issue meant essentially Lithuania, as Lithuania following elections for a new assembly, issued a declaration of independence on 11 March and provoked a major crisis that had international repercussions. The result was a mini-crisis in US–Soviet relations as Gorbachev responded with an economic boycott. The message from Washington was to keep repeating what was regarded as the understanding with Gorbachev against the use of force. The United States pursued a political course of the art of the possible. In the end the United States urged Lithuanian leaders that they follow the suggestion of President Mitterand and Chancellor Kohl and suspend their declaration of independence and at the same time urged Gorbachev to end the economic boycott and begin a dialogue.<sup>19</sup> The dialogue had difficulty in getting started because Gorbachev was unwilling to consider independence. As he admitted in his memoirs, he was against any kind of separation and considered the maintenance of what he regarded as a renewed federation one of his primary policy goals for the Soviet Union. While Gorbachev seems to have had a historical understanding of the “nationality” problem of the Soviet Union, in practice he showed that he was really unwilling to do much to solve it. Thus, he fully criticized the centralism of the Soviet system which he blamed on Stalin and promised to change it.<sup>20</sup> Yet, in his remarks to the Baltic leaders about the Baltic area being joined to Russia since Peter the Great, and that the Baltic republics could not exist without economic ties to Russia, he showed himself incapable of dealing with the arguments of the Baltic leaders.<sup>21</sup> Secretary Baker and Ambassador Matlock, who dealt with Gorbachev, realized that he did not have a solution for the Soviet nationality

<sup>19</sup> George H. W. Bush, *All the best: my life in letters and other writings* (New York: Scribner, 2013), 468. Letter from G. Bush to M. Gorbachev (29 April 1990): “[...] we felt that a ‘suspension’ by Lithuania of its resolution, as suggested by President Mitterand and Chancellor Kohl, coupled with your willingness to meet with the Lithuanians outside the federation concept would be the best way to break the ice [...]. Here is the basic reality – there is no way Congress will approve MFN (Most Favored Nation trade) under existing circumstances – no way at all [...]. I will not be able to recommend approval.” It is true that Bush backtracked on MFN treaty at the May 1990 summit meeting and signed the treaty. Whether the treaty would have been ratified by the Senate can be questioned. Beschloss, Talbott, *At the highest levels*, 222–224.

<sup>20</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, trans. by George Peronansky and Tatjana Varsavsky (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 326–347.

<sup>21</sup> Vytautas Landsbergis, *Lithuania independent again*, trans. by Anthony Packer and Eimutis Sova (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 197–213.

question.<sup>22</sup> Both Baker and Matlock understood the force of nationalism in other historical situations in the twentieth century. James Baker realized that, while Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze had a basic gut feeling for the seriousness of the issue, Gorbachev failed to grasp the serious nature of the problem for the Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup> But Shevardnadze also argued that the Baltic republics could not be separated from the rest of the republics: that if the Baltics separated the others will follow. He may have been thinking too much about Georgia. Of course, part of the problem was that for a long time the Soviet leadership could not accept the truth about the secret protocols of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact nor the connection between the Pact and the Soviet occupation and annexation in 1940.<sup>24</sup> Hence a case for Baltic exceptionalism (the essence of the Bush–Baker approach) could neither be made to them nor to the Soviet population. The existence of a period of Baltic independence from 1918–40 did not mean much for the Soviet leadership.

If we return again to consider issues of prime importance to the Bush administration, these would have been the encouragement of changes in Eastern Europe in 1989, then the unification of Germany in 1990, and throughout the period a continuous discussion on arms reductions, both nuclear and conventional. These issues clearly signaled the end of the Cold War and could clearly be connected to major US security interests. Regional conflicts were somewhat less important. Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan had already begun during Reagan's term as had a lessening of Soviet involvement in Central America. A new issue arose during the autumn of 1990, as the Gulf crisis occasioned by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 led to intense US diplomacy to align the Soviet Union with the US position. During the period this became the priority issue for US policy.

What I have labeled second-category items included human rights like Jewish emigration, economic relations and in particular trade, some of the regional problems, and the Baltic issue. These topics were always included in discussions and the American side put forward concrete proposals, but these items did not impinge on US national security concerns. They could be carried into the next round of negotiations. It is important to note, however, that these topics were real issues in high politics and not just propaganda items.

<sup>22</sup> Jack F. Matlock, Jr., *Autopsy on an empire* (New York: Random House, 1995), 378–382.

<sup>23</sup> Baker, *The politics of diplomacy*, 77–78.

<sup>24</sup> Landsbergis' comments on the 'Commission for Evaluating the Non-Aggression Agreement between the Soviet Union and Germany,' Landsbergis, *Lithuania independent again*, 147–151.

The officials of the Bush administration were realistic politicians. If we define politics as the art of the possible, then the difficulty of reaching a settlement of the Baltic issue in comparison with other questions is rather clear. Gorbachev was willing to deal on Eastern Europe, Germany, and arms reduction. Eastern Europe and Germany were regarded as outside the Soviet Union. He in fact had conceded them by ruling out military intervention. The purpose of arms reduction was to provide savings for the Soviet economy. The Baltic issue, however, was tied up with Soviet and Russian identity and internal politics. It raised questions in Gorbachev's and Shevardnadze's minds of the existence of the Soviet Union and also in Gorbachev's mind of the identity of Russia – for him the Baltic states had belonged to tsarist Russia and had only separated because of the weakness of Russia during the Civil War.<sup>25</sup> Bush and Baker were faced with a quandary. They could not publicly denounce Gorbachev on this issue because they felt it would not lead anywhere. They knew that Gorbachev would be backed by the Soviet military and political establishment and would not accept an ultimatum. They did not have sufficient leverage with Gorbachev to have achieved a solution in exchange for something else.<sup>26</sup> They could only play for time and hope that the circumstances would change. Furthermore, they began to fear that the Soviet military and conservative politicians would overthrow Gorbachev. They did not want to jeopardize agreements on the first priority issues like Germany and arms reduction, or even some agreements on regional issues. It is instructive that Secretary James Baker thought at times in terms of locking in existing agreements and understandings in case relations with Russia went askew and no further progress on other agreements could be made.<sup>27</sup>

That the Baltic question was, however, a real issue of high politics is shown by the willingness of the Bush administration to tie it to economic treaties. Traditionally US/Soviet trade (most favored-nation treatment) had been tied to the issue of Jewish emigration by the Jackson-Vanik

<sup>25</sup> Robert Service paraphrases Gorbachev's words at the 13 February 1990 Politburo meeting: "He told the Politburo that Estonia had gained independence in 1920 only because Russia was weakened by civil war." Politburo meeting, 13 February 1990: Anatoli Chernyaev Papers (RESCA), box 1b, 48. As cited in: Service, *The end of the Cold War*, 459.

<sup>26</sup> Bush noted in his diary on 28 March 1990: "Everyone wants us to 'do more,' [...] but the big thing is to get through this so the Soviets and the Lithuanians get into negotiations, and handle it without bloodshed and force. If there is bloodshed, there is not a damn thing the United States can do about it and you'd have blood on your hands for encouraging her and inciting the Lithuanians to bite off more than they can chew at this point." Bush, *All the best*, 466.

<sup>27</sup> Baker, *The politics of diplomacy*, 156.



amendment. Now trade came to be also linked to the Baltic issue. During the seizure of the television tower by the Soviet military in Vilnius in January 1991 and the bloodshed accompanying it, President Bush announced that unless the violence ceased he would order the stopping of trade and investment legislation that dealt with US/Soviet economic relations. Bush wrote in a letter to Mikhail Gorbachev on 23 January 1991:<sup>28</sup>

I had hoped to see positive steps toward the peaceful resolution of this conflict with the elected leaders of the Baltic states. [...] Thus, unless you can take these positive steps very soon, I will freeze many elements of our economic relationship including Export-Import credit guarantees; Commodity Credit Corporation credit guarantees; support for 'Special Associate Status' for the Soviet Union in the International Monetary Fund and World Bank; and most of our technical assistance programs. Further, I would not submit the Bilateral Investment Treaty or Tax Treaty to the United States Senate for consent to ratification when and if they are completed.

Whether the threat of US action (or actually, the lack of any action on economic questions) had an impact on the situation on the ground in Lithuania following the seizure of the television tower in Vilnius and the resulting bloodshed is difficult to say until the events have been fully researched. Ultimately US policy was stymied over the Baltic question. Without the rise of Yeltsin, who was willing to accept the separation of the Baltic States from Russia, how matters would have developed is hard to predict.<sup>29</sup> Following the failure of the coup in August, the fact of Bush delaying US resumption of relations (by this time it was clear that this was simply a delay and not a question of whether it should be done) can be justified in two ways – as a continued effort to show deference to Gorbachev and help shore up his authority or an attempt to place on record that the Soviet Union agreed to recognize the independence of the Baltic states freely by itself and not be the last to provide recognition.<sup>30</sup> It probably was misplaced caution since

<sup>28</sup> Bush, *All the best*, 508.

<sup>29</sup> Yeltsin's joint statement with the three Baltic presidents of 13 January 1991 in: Leon Aron, *Yeltsin: a revolutionary life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 410–411. Also: Boris Yeltsin, *The struggle for Russia*, trans. by Catherine A. Fitzpatrick (New York: Random House, 1994), 112–113.

<sup>30</sup> George Bush noted in his diary (2 September, 1991): "Today I had a press conference. I recognized the Baltics. I talked to the Presidents of Estonia and Latvia today, having talked to Landsbergis of Lithuania a couple of days ago... I told them why we waited a few days more. What I tried to do was to use the power and the prestige of the United States, not to posture, not to be the first on board, but to encourage Gorbachev to move

after all the 1920 Peace of Tartu between Estonia and Soviet Russia had been negotiated freely by Lenin and Soviet Russia. The independence of the Baltic States was thus again recognized by the Soviet Union while there was still a Soviet Union.<sup>31</sup>

If indeed the coup had been successful in August 1991, Baltic independence would not have come about in 1991. The US non-recognition policy would have continued alongside a continuing unsettled situation in the Soviet Union, the outcome of which would have been difficult to predict. In fact, following criticism of Bush's speech against Ukrainian independence in Kiev in July 1991, Scowcroft offered in defense of Bush that US still followed a non-recognition policy toward the Baltic States.<sup>32</sup> After all the developments of the preceding two years, this was a very weak position and statement.

Baltic leaders, of course, did not know that behind the scenes the Bush administration had been continuously raising the Baltic issue. They probably criticized Bush unfairly for not publicly speaking out more forcefully on the issue. In the end US policy did have an impact in helping to keep the Baltic issue alive, in making it clear to the Soviet leadership that this was an international issue and helping maintain morale in the Baltics. There was a price that the Soviet would have had to pay for a full-scale military crack-down in the Baltics – impaired economic relations with the United States. Robert Hutchings documented Bush's emotional reaction which suggests that Bush rejected Lennart Meri's reproach in July 1992 in Helsinki that Bush had not acted forcefully enough toward Gorbachev and the Soviet hard-liners.<sup>33</sup>

Robert Hutchings concludes "all's well that ends well". In the end US policy achieved what the goal had been – the restoration of the independence

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faster on "freeing the Baltics." Yesterday, he did make a statement to this effect [...]" Bush, *All the best*, 536.

<sup>31</sup> Serhii Plokhy notes that after the departure of the Baltic States, it was not a foregone conclusion that the rest of the Soviet Union would fall apart. Internal politics in particular the relations between Russia and Ukraine sealed the fate of the USSR. Plokhy argues: "The inability of the Soviet leaders to discriminate between the Union republics in constitutional terms was one of the realities of Soviet political life that George H. W. Bush and his advisers in Washington never fully grasped. They kept pushing for the independence of the Baltic republics, convinced that the Soviet Union could not only survive but do very well without them. Their argument was about fairness and legality [...]" Serhii Plokhy, *The last empire: the final days of the Soviet Union* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 403.

<sup>32</sup> Service, *The end of the Cold War*, 489.

<sup>33</sup> Hutchings, *American diplomacy and the end of the Cold War*, 337–338.

of the Baltic States.<sup>34</sup> He argues that US policy makers made clear to Gorbachev and Shevardnadze that the US adhered to the non-recognition policy and regarded the issue of the Baltic States differently from the rest of the Soviet Union. Bush thought he had an understanding with Gorbachev from Malta onward that force would not be used in the Baltics. Baker made suggestions on ways to resolve the issue – organization of referendums, beginning of talks on independence, etc. None of these suggestions led to any results. When violence came to Lithuania and Latvia, the US reaction was to tie the issue to economics and trade and Gorbachev was given to understand that US–Soviet relations would suffer as a result of the military action. Indeed, at the Moscow summit in July 1991, Bush again urged Gorbachev directly:<sup>35</sup>

I told Gorbachev that Yeltsin was advocating many of the things we wanted – cutting aid to Cuba, instant freedom for the Baltics. The one action Gorbachev could take that would help his cause most in the United States was granting independence to the Baltics.

Yet, it was not enough. Events on the ground, the failed coup, and the rise of Yeltsin were the decisive events that finally led Gorbachev to extend Soviet recognition to the Baltic States.

What can we conclude about US policy at two different time periods, 1918–20 and 1989–91? In both cases the United States dealt with the Baltics primarily as the area related to Russia and only secondarily in connection with developments in Eastern Europe. In both cases the Russia that was the official partner of the United States (in 1919–20: ambassador Boris Bakhmeteff, and in 1989–91: Mikhail Gorbachev) opposed the independence of the Baltic States. In the earlier period US foreign policy leaders, President

<sup>34</sup> Hutchings notes: “[...] the objectives, as we had framed them, were realized fully and with less bloodshed than we feared. The independence of the Baltic states was an aim from which we never wavered, but it was one that we balanced against other key objectives.” Hutchings, *American diplomacy and the end of the Cold War*, 337.

<sup>35</sup> Bush, Scowcroft, *A world transformed*, 509. Here I may offer a disagreement with the conclusion of Kristina Spohr Readman’s insightful article (Kristina Spohr Readman, “Between political rhetoric and realpolitik calculations: western diplomacy and the Baltic independence struggle in the Cold War endgame”, *Cold War History*, 6:1 (February 2006), 31–32) that argues the West including the United States did not actively seek Baltic independence and that Bush’s primary objective was to maintain the Soviet Union. My argument is that Bush consistently sought to separate the issue of the Baltic States (hence the legal arguments) from the rest of the Soviet Union. He did not bring up the issue of self-determination for the other republics in his discussions with Gorbachev. Yes, he wanted to preserve the rest of the Soviet Union in part because of a serious worry about nuclear weapons and their control.

Wilson and both Secretaries of State, Robert Lansing and William Colby, and most of the State Department officials accepted the views of Ambassador Bakhmeteff and White Russian generals on the need for the unity of Russia. In the later period, the views of the foreign policy leaders, President Bush, Secretary Baker, and others clearly favored the independence of the Baltic States. There was a heavy dose of legalism in the views of officials in both periods as well as statements on implementing "self-determination".

In neither case can we say that US policy decisively determined the outcome of the events. In both cases much depended on the strength or weakness of the Baltic national movements themselves, as well as the policies of other European states. In both cases the attitudes of political leaders in Russia were important. In the earlier period, Lenin, the head of the Soviet Russian government, was willing to at least temporarily accept the independence of the Baltic States and in the second case, Boris Yeltsin, the President of Russia, in turn was willing to recognize the independence of the Baltics. In both cases, United States did play a role in bringing about independence. In the first case US assistance was mostly economic; in the second case, the aid was clearly political in pressuring the Soviet government of Mikhail Gorbachev to hold off any violent repression, in continually bringing up the Baltic question in bilateral negotiations, and in defining the Baltic issue as distinct from the rest of the Soviet Union, until in the end independence was achieved peacefully.

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### KOKKUVÕTE: Ameerika Ühendriikide välispoliitika Eesti ja Balti riikide suhtes 1918–1920 ja 1989–1991

Artiklis käsitletakse Ameerika Ühendriikide poliitikat Eesti ja teiste Balti riikide tekkimise ajal (1918–20) ja Balti riikide taasiseseisvumise aastatel (1989–91). Võrreldakse Ameerika poliitikat kahel erineval perioodil

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maailma ajaloos ja kahe väga erineva Ameerika Ühendriikide presidendi poliitikat.

Ameerika lõunaosariikidest pärit Woodrow F. Wilson valiti presidendiks 1912. aastal. Ta oli enne poliitikasse siirdumist olnud õppejõud mitmes ülikoolis ja Princetoni ülikooli president. Wilson valiti 1910 New Jersey osariigi kuberneriks, kuid tal puudusid välispoliitilised kogemused. Presidendina püüdis ta Ameerikat Esimesest maailmasõjast eemal hoida, aga kui Saksamaa kuulutas välja allveelaevasõja Atlandi ookeanis, mis oli suunatud ka Ameerika kaubalaevade vastu, nõudis Wilson 2. aprillil 1917 sõja kuulutamist Saksamaale.

8. jaanuaril 1918 pakkus Wilson välja oma 14-punktilise rahuplaani. Kui Saksamaa mõistis, et on sõja kaotanud, aktsepteeris Saksa valitsus Wilsoni nõutud 14 punkti. Üks nendest punktidest oli seotud Vene küsimusega: sakslased pidid Venemaa territoriumilt evakueeruma. Kuigi Wilson ei kasutanud oma väljapakutud 14 punkti kõnes väljendit "rahvaste enesemääramine", toetas ta seda printsiipi oma hilisemates kõnedes, millest tekkis valearusaam, et Wilson tahtis maailma muuta selle põhimõtte järgi (nn wilsonianism). See oli tegelikult tema nõunik kolonel Edward House, kes pooldas liitlaste vaherahuläbirääkimistel rahvaste enesemääramise printsiibi kasutamist Balti riikides. Järgides seda mõtet, aitas Ameerika majanduspoliitika, eriti Herbert Hooveri tegevus 1919. aasta kevadel ja suvel Eesti majandust Euroopa majandusruumi integreerida. Samal ajal jätkas riigisekretär Robert Lansing ajutise valitsuse saadiku Boris Bahmetjevi mõjul Venemaa ühtsuse idee toetamist kui ainust võimalust kukutada bolševike valitsust Venemaal. 1919. aasta suvel võttis selle vaate omaks ka Woodrow Wilson. Ta ei toetanud enesemääramise õigust Iirimaa ega ka Baltimaades.

Teisel vaatlusalusel perioodil oli Ameerika poliitika selgem. 1988. aastal presidendiks valitud George H. W. Bush oli Ameerika ajaloos selleks ametiks üks kõige paremini ettevalmistatud kandidaat. Ta oli tegelenud Ameerika sisepoliitikaga kui kongresmen ja vabariiklaste partei komitee juhataja ning välispoliitikaga kui Ameerika saadik ÜRO-s, Ameerika esindaja Hiinas, Luure Keskagentuuri direktor ja Ronald Reagani asepresident. George Bush lõpetas presidendina Ameerika külma sõja poliitika. Rahvaste enesemääramise printsiip võeti taas kasutusele ja sellega õigustati sündmuste käiku Ida-Euroopas ja ka Saksamaal. Revolutsioonilised sündmused Balti vabariikides 1988.–89. aastal tõstsid uuesti esile ka Balti küsimuse. Ameerika ei olnud tunnustanud Balti riikide annekteerimist Nõukogude Liidu poolt (nn mittetunnustamise poliitika). President George Bush ja riigisekretär James Baker mainisid seda fakti igal kohtumisel Mihhail

Gorbatšovi või välisminister Eduard Ševardnadzega. Nad püüdsid teha Balti riikidest erandi, mille saatus oli lahus teistest Nõukogude Liidu osadest. Selle tulemusel muutus Balti riikide küsimus kahe riigi vahel tõsiseks tüliõunaks. Peame siiski tähendama et Balti küsimus ei olnud Washingtonile sama oluline kui näiteks tuumarelvade vähendamise küsimus, Saksamaa ühendamine või Kuveidi sõda Lähis-Idas. Ameerika oli valmis Nõukogude Liidule majanduslikke soodustusi pakkuma, kui Baltimaade saatus oleks rahulikult lahendatud.

Balti küsimus oli uus ja kerkis esile alles Esimese maailmasõja lõpul; Wilson lihtsalt ei tegelenud selle küsimusega. Bushile oli Baltikumi saatus tõsine välispoliitiline küsimus algusest peale, Ameerika Balti riikide annekteerimise mittetunnustamise poliitika oli paigas enne, kui Bush presidendiks valiti. Pärast Esimest maailmasõda tõmbas Wilson Ameerika väed tagasi kodumandrile, Bush pidas aga Ameerika sõjaväe kohalolekut Euroopas vajalikuks. Ameerika poliitika tähtsus külma sõja lõpul seisnes selles, et vägivalda kasutamine hoiti minimaalsena ja külma sõda lõppes rahulikult. Bush rõhutas kogu aeg, et Baltimaades ei tohi vägivalda kasutada: rahvaste enesemääramise printsiipi tuleb rakendada, aga ka rahu tuleb säilitada.